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On the Internet

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'Body am I, and soul' – thus speaks the child. And why should one not speak like children?

But the awakened and knowing say: body am I entirely, and nothing else; and soul is only a word for something about the body.

Behind your thoughts and feelings, my brother, there stands a mighty ruler, an unknown sage – whose name is self. In your body he dwells; he is your body.

Friedrich Nietzsche, **Thus Spake Zarathustra**, trans. W. Kaufmann, New York: Viking Press, 1966, p. 34

The body is our general medium for having a world. Sometimes it is restricted to the actions necessary for the conservation of life, and accordingly it posits around us a biological world; at other times, elaborating upon these primary actions and moving from their literal to a figurative meaning, it manifests through them a core of new significance: this is true of motor skills such as dancing. Sometimes, finally, the meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body's natural means; it must then build itself an instrument, and it projects thereby around itself a cultural world.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, **Phenomenology of Perception**, trans. C. Smith, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962, p. 146

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Introduction

I teach you the overman. Man is something that is to be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?

Friedrich Nietzsche, **Thus Spake Zarathustra**, prologue

Why seek to become posthuman? . . . Certainly, we can achieve much while remaining human. Yet we can attain higher peaks only by applying our intelligence, determination, and optimism to break out of the human chrysalis. . . . Our bodies . . . restrain our capacities.

Nietzsche citation and response by Max More, founder of the Extropian Institute[1]

http://www.ct.heise.de/tp/english/inhalt/co/2041/1.html

The Internet is not just a new technological innovation; it is a new *type* of technological innovation; one that brings out the very essence of technology. Up to now, technological innovators have generally produced devices that served needs that were already recognized, and then discovered some unexpected side effects. So Alexander Graham Bell thought the telephone would be useful for communication in business but would not be accepted into people's homes, let alone intrude as they walked down the street. Likewise, Henry Ford thought of the automobile as giving people cheap reliable, individualized transportation, but he did not imagine it would destroy the inner cities and liberate adolescent sex. The Net is different. It was originally intended for communication between scientists, but now *that* is a side effect. We have come to realize that the Net is too gigantic and protean for us to think of it as a device for satisfying *any* specific need, and each new use it affords is a surprise. If the

essence of technology is to make *everything* easily accessible and optimizable, then the Internet is the perfect technological device. It is the culmination of the same tendency to make everything as flexible as possible that has led us to digitalize and interconnect as much of reality as we can.[2] What the Web will allow us to do is literally unlimited. This pure flexibility naturally leads people to vie for outrageous predictions as to what the Net will become. We are told that, given its new way of linking and accessing information, the Internet will bring a new era of economic prosperity, lead to the development of intelligent search engines that will deliver to us just the information we desire, solve the problems of mass education, put us in touch with all of reality, allow us to have even more flexible identities than we already have and thereby add new dimensions of meaning to our lives.

But, compared with the relative success of e-commerce, the other areas where a new and more fulfilling form of life has been promised have produced a great deal of talk but few happy results.[3] In fact, researchers at Carnegie-Mellon University were surprised to find that, when people were given access to the World Wide Web, they found themselves feeling isolated and depressed. *The New York Times* reports:

> The results of the $1.5 million project ran completely contrary to expectations of the social scientists who designed it and to many of the organizations that financed the study. . . . 'We were shocked by the findings, because they are counterintuitive to what we know about how socially the Internet is being used,' said Robert Kraut, a social psychology professor at Carnegie Mellon's Human Computer Interaction Institute. 'We are not talking here about the extremes. These were normal adults and their families, and on average, for those who used the Internet most, things got worse.'[4]

The researchers sum up their findings as follows:

> This research examined the social and psychological impact of the Internet on 169 people in seventy-three households during their first one to two years on-line. . . . In this sample, the Internet was used extensively for communication. Nonetheless, greater use of the Internet was associated with declines in participants' communication with family members in the household, declines in the size of their social circle, and increases in their depression and loneliness.[5]

The authors conclude that what is missing is people's actual embodied presence to each other:

> On-line friendships are likely to be more limited than friendships supported by physical proximity. . . . Because on-line friends are not embedded in the same day-to-day environment, they will be less likely to understand the context for conversation, making discussion more difficult and rendering support less applicable. Even strong ties maintained at a distance through electronic communication are likely to be different in kind and perhaps diminished in strength compared with strong ties supported by physical proximity. The interpersonal communication applications currently prevalent on the Internet are either neutral toward strong ties or tend to undercut rather than promote them.[6]

This surprising discovery shows that the Internet user's disembodiment has profound and unexpected effects. Presumably, it affects people in ways that are different from the way most tools do because it can become the main way its users

relate to the rest of the world. Given these surprises and disappointments, we would naturally like to know what are the benefits and the dangers of living our lives on-line? Only then might we hope to have a glimmer concerning what the Net can become and what we will become in the process of living through it.

According to the most extreme Net enthusiasts, the long-range promise of the Net is that each of us will soon be able to transcend the limits imposed on us by our body. As John Perry Barlow, one of the foremost proponents of this vision, puts it, the electronic frontier is 'a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live'. By our body, such visionaries seem to mean not only our physical body with its front and back, arms and legs, and ability to move around in the world, but also our moods that make things matter to us, our location in a particular context where we have to cope with things and people, and the many ways we are exposed to disappointment and failure as well as to injury and death. In short, by embodiment they include all aspects of our finitude and vulnerability. In the rest of this book, I will understand the body in these broad terms.

Yeats lamented that his soul was 'fastened to a dying animal' ('Sailing to Byzantium', in *The Tower*, 1928) and it is easy to see the attraction of completing human evolution by leaving behind the animal bodies in which our linguistic and cultural identities are now imprisoned. Who wouldn't wish to become a disembodied being who could be anywhere in the universe and make backup copies of himself to avoid injury and death? Web visionaries and many others would be delighted to be free from deformities, depression, sickness, old age, and death. This is the promise offered us by computer-inspired futurists such as Hans Moravec[8] and Ray Kurzweil.[9] It is typified on the Net (where else?) by such international groups as the Extropians, whose leader, Max More, is quoted in the epigraph to this Introduction. But even more down-to-earth gurus subscribe to the dream that we are entering a new level of civilization. According to industry consultant Esther Dyson, 'Cyberspace is the land of knowledge, and the exploration of that land can be a civilization's truest, highest calling.'[10]

Leaving the body behind would have pleased Plato, who subscribed to the saying that the body was the tomb of the soul[11] and followed Socrates in claiming that it should be a human being's highest goal to 'die to his body' and become a pure mind. As Socrates put it: 'In despising the body and avoiding it, and endeavoring to become independent – the philosopher's soul is ahead of all the rest.'[12] But that makes it surprising that the Extropians claim to be following Nietzsche, not Plato, when they say we should transcend our humanity.

In fact, Nietzsche's anti-Platonic view of the body is in the very book about the overman the Extropians love to quote. In a section called 'On the Despisers of the Body' Nietzsche has Zarathustra say, as if in direct response to the Extropians: 'I shall not go your way, O despisers of the body! You are no bridge to the overman!'[13] And he continues:

> 'I,' you say, and are proud of the word. But greater is that in which you do not wish to have faith – your body and its great reason: that does not say 'I,' but does 'I.' . . . Behind your thoughts and feelings, my brother, there stands a mighty ruler, an unknown sage – whose name is self. In your body he dwells; he is your body.[14]

Nietzsche thought that the most important thing about human beings was not their intellectual capacities but the emotional and intuitive capacities of their body. In his relentless battle against Platonism and Christianity, even in its most hidden forms in science and technology, Nietzsche, indeed, looked forward to our transcending our human limitations and becoming overmen, but by that he meant that human beings, rather than continuing to deny death and finitude, would finally have the strength to affirm their bodies and their mortality.

So the issue we have to face is: can we get along without our bodies? Is the body just a remnant of our descent from the animal – a limitation on our freedom which the human race is now positioned to outgrow, as the Extropians claim – or does the body play a crucial role even in our spiritual and intellectual life, as Nietzsche contends? If Nietzsche is right, the Net's supposed greatest advantage, freedom from the limits imposed by our bodies, is, ironically, its Achilles' heel.

As a philosopher, I'm not going to become involved in condemning some specific uses of the Internet and praising others. My question is a more speculative one: what if the Net became central in our lives? What if it becomes what Joseph Nye, dean of Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, calls an 'irresistible alternative culture'? To the extent that we came to live a large part of our lives in cyberspace, would we become super- or infra-human?

In seeking an answer, we should remain open to the possibility that, when we enter cyberspace and leave behind our animal-shaped, emotional, intuitive, situated, vulnerable, embodied selves, and thereby gain a remarkable new freedom never before available to human beings, we might, at the same time, necessarily lose some of our crucial capacities: our

ability to make sense of things so as to distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant, our sense of the seriousness of success and failure that is necessary for learning, and our need to get a maximum grip on the world that gives us our sense of the reality of things. Furthermore, we would be tempted to avoid the risk of genuine commitment, and so lose our sense of what gives meaning to our lives. Indeed, in what follows, I hope to show that, if our body goes, so does relevance, skill, reality, and meaning. If that is the trade-off, the prospect of living our lives in and through the Web may not be so attractive after all.

SUMMARY

Chapter 1. The limitations of hyperlinks. The hope for intelligent information retrieval, and the failure of AI. How the actual shape and movement of our bodies play a crucial role in our making sense of our world, so that loss of embodiment would lead to loss of the ability to recognize relevance.

Chapter 2. The dream of distance learning. The importance of mattering for teaching and learning. Apprenticeship and the need for imitation. Without involvement and presence we cannot acquire skills.

Chapter 3. The absence of telepresence. The body as source of our sense of our grip on reality. How the loss of background coping and attunement endemic to telepresence would lead to the loss of a sense of the reality of people and things.

Chapter 4. Anonymity and nihilism. Meaning in our lives requires genuine commitment and real commitment requires real risks. The anonymity and safety of virtual commitments on-line would lead to life without meaning.